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Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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The Situation of Displaced Palestinian Families North of Syria

The six-year war in Syrian Arab Republic has taken a dramatic toll on the Palestinian community taking refuge in the embattled country, with more than 3,870 estimated deaths recorded among Palestinian refugees.

The war also resulted in the displacement of 280,000 Palestinians from their homes and shelters in the Syrian Arab Republic while 120,000 others have fled the country as they sought safe shelters.

Following the reconciliation deals which led to the mass exodus of civilians, activists, and journalists and the bloody hostilities, hundreds of families have been forcibly driven out of their camps. Scores of Palestinians have gone missing right after they opposed forced military conscription with pro-government battalions.

At a certain stage in the conflict, de-escalation zones in northern Syria have served as provisional shelters in which Palestinian families, fleeing such embattled areas as Khan Esheih Camp, Eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk Camp, and Daraa Camp, hid themselves into following a Russian-brokered deal.

Stopovers of Forced Deportation Journeys

According to data by Khayra Ummah Association, 1,292 displaced Palestinian families have sought shelter in northern Syria. The list includes:

*50 families in Afrin

*45 in Jindires

*36 in Afrin Suburbs

*380 in Deir Ballout

*56 in Maarat AlNu'man

*48 in Ariha

*62 in Akrebat

*25 in Maarat Mesrin and Kilali

*72 in Sarmada and AlDana

*205 in Atama

*239 in Idlib

*74 in unknown locations

The largest tide of mass deportation saw the day in Khan Eshieh Camp, located 27 kilometers southwest of Damascus, following a reconciliation deal struck between the Syrian government and the opposition outfits on November 28, 2016. On December 2, 2016, some 200 Palestinian families reached Idlib.

Another 120 families were forced out of their homes in Eastern Ghouta. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, UNRWA figures indicated that 8,181 families, comprising an estimated 30,216 members, used to live in the Eastern Ghouta towns of Douma, Jober, and AlMaliha.

As many as 835 Palestinian families were hounded out of their homes following a deal sealed on April 29, 2018.

66 more Palestinian families from Daraa and AlQuneitra, south of Syria, have also sought shelter north of Syria in the aftermath of an agreement concluded in early July 2018.

Conditions Endured by Displaced Palestinian Families North of Syria

Most of the Palestinian refugee camps set up north of Syria have been run by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). The Turkish Red Crescent and a number of charities have also worked together to assist the displaced families.

Nonetheless, the width of need and poverty has far outlived the charities' capacities to cope with it. Unemployment has hit its highest rate in the region at the same time as the families' increasing demands for financial resources have almost gone unheeded. The majority of relief institutions have gone inoperative due to funding crisis. The situation has gone from bad to worse due to the price leaps, steep rental fees, and the reluctance of such international bodies as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to step in justified on the basis that Palestine refugees fall within the scope of UNRWA's mandate.

Upon more than one occasion, dozens of families who were forcibly deported from southern Damascus and Yarmouk Camp to Deir Ballout Camp, north of Syria, took down to the street, protesting their dire living conditions.

The displaced families continue to appeal to the concerned human rights bodies, most notably the United Nations, to take urgent action so as to secure their access to education and health care, among other vital services.

The families continue to sound alarm bells over the acute shortage in drinking water and the fallouts of poor hygiene infecting their camps.

Dozens of families have been crammed into poorly-equipped camps pitched by the Turkish authorities in AlBab city. With no properly arranged places to stay in, they must find a way to ensure shelter, food and drinking water in the intense, grueling heat wrought by the summer season.

Ongoing psychological pressure wrought by the dire situation might have contributed to the death of some Palestinians. On May 15, 2018, Palestinian refugee Mohanad Sakhnini died of a heart attack, with no first aid available to save his life. On May 17, 2018, Palestinian refugee Amer Aker was pronounced dead as a result of a heart attack as well. On May 23, 2018, refugee Abu Aziz AlShehabi drowned while trying to save a young man's life in a lake nearby.

UNRWA's Role

UNRWA has been providing relief services mainly in government-held zones. Families sheltered in opposition-led areas have been deprived of relief and in-kind items handed over by the agency.

On May 28, 2018 UNRWA issued a decision banning displaced Palestinians in Idlib and in flashpoints in Syria to receive their relatives' cash and in-kind aids. Hundreds of displaced families whose survival largely hinged on relief assistance have been left on their own.

Findings and Recommendations

Amid a deteriorating security situation in Syria, scores of Palestinian refugee families who have been forcibly deported to northern Syria have faced a calamitous humanitarian situation inflicted by food insecurity, poverty, and a precarious legal status, among other crises.

Despite these rights being protected by international laws and treaties, the displaced Palestinian refugees have been deprived of the physical, moral, and legal protection quite urgently needed at times of conflict.

The displaced families continue to voice deep concern over their fate, fearing an imminent military operation by the Syrian and Russian forces in an attempt to recapture de-escalation zones.

The international community and institutions, namely UNRWA, in its capacity as the UN agency in charge of the protection of Palestine refugees in its fields of operation, should take urgent action so as to secure the access of displaced families to basic humanitarian services and much-needed items.

UNRWA should make urgent initiatives so as to provide the Palestinians with the psycho-physical and legal protection they are in need of at such a critical stage.

All concerned human rights institutions should make serious steps to contribute to the welfare and protection of the displaced Palestinians, particularly, but not exclusively, in northern Syria.

As we strongly condemn the tide of violence rocking the Syrian territories and the Middle East, we call on the United Nations to live up to its humanitarian mission as regards the situation of displaced Palestinian refugees living in extremely miserable conditions that are not only unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view but also constitute a major threat to the stability and security of the entire region.